

### **Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

### **Listing of Claims:**

1. (currently amended) A method to establish preferred business partners via a communication network, the method comprising:

providing a vendor certification program comprising a curriculum via the communication network on a fee basis;

receiving a notification, from an entity administering the vendor certification program, that a vendor has successfully completed the vendor certification program; and

granting certified vendor status upon the vendor indicated in the notification,

wherein the certified vendor status confers preferential consideration to the vendor during acquisition decisions by an entity.

2. (original) A computer-readable medium having stored thereon computer-executable instructions for implementing the method of claim 1.

3. (original) The method of claim 1, wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity.

4. (original) The method of claim 1, further comprising:

undertaking an acquisition decision;

accessing information regarding a plurality of vendors, the plurality of vendors comprising at least one vendor having certified vendor status; and

providing preferential consideration to the at least one vendor having certified vendor status when resolving the acquisition decision.

5. (original) The method of claim 1, wherein the vendor comprises a plurality of personnel, and wherein granting of the certified vendor status further comprises granting variable levels of certified vendor status such that increasing numbers of the plurality of personnel that have successfully completed the vendor certification program confers increasing levels of preferential consideration.

6. (original) The method of claim 1, further comprising providing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via a public communication network.

7. (original) The method of claim 6, further comprising providing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via either of an Internet or World Wide Web communication network.

8. (original) The method of claim 1, further comprising providing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via a private communication network.

9. (original) A method, via a communication network, for a vendor to obtain preferred status from an entity, the method comprising:

registering for a fee-based vendor certification program provided by the entity, wherein the vendor certification program comprises a curriculum;

successfully completing the curriculum via the communication network; and

receiving, from the entity, a notification of certified vendor status in response to successful completion of the curriculum,

wherein the certified vendor status confers preferential consideration during acquisition decisions by the entity.

10. (original) A computer-readable medium having stored thereon computer-executable instructions for implementing the method of claim 9.

11. (original) The method of claim 9, wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity.

12. (original) The method of claim 8, wherein the vendor comprises a plurality of personnel, and wherein receiving the certified vendor status further comprises receiving variable levels of certified vendor status such that increasing numbers of the plurality of personnel that have successfully completed the vendor certification program results in increasing levels of preferential consideration.

13. (original) The method of claim 8, further comprising successfully completing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via a public communication network.

14. (original) The method of claim 13, further comprising successfully completing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via either of an Internet or World Wide Web communication network.

15. (original) The method of claim 8, further comprising successfully completing the vendor certification program, at least in part, via a private communication network.

16. (previously amended) An apparatus to establish preferred business partners via a communication network, the apparatus comprising:

- a network interface for communicating with the communication network;

- at least one processor coupled to the network interface; and

- at least one memory device, coupled to the at least one processor, having stored thereon executable instructions that, when executed by the at least one processor, cause the at least one processor to:

- provide a vendor certification program comprising a curriculum via the network interface on a fee basis;

- receive a notification that a vendor has successfully completed the vendor certification program; and

- grant certified vendor status upon the vendor indicated in the notification,

- wherein the certified vendor status confers preferential consideration to the vendor during acquisition decisions by an entity.

17. (original) The apparatus of claim 16, wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity.

18. (original) The apparatus of claim 16, wherein the curriculum is stored in the at least one memory device.

19. (original) The apparatus of claim 16, wherein the network interface communicates with a public communication network.

20. (original) The apparatus of claim 19, wherein the network interface communicates with either of an Internet or World Wide Web communication network.

21. (original) The apparatus of claim 16, wherein the network interface communicates with a private communication network.

22. (original) A system whereby an entity establishes relationships with vendors via a communication network, the system comprising:

a learning management component, operatively coupled to the communication network, that administers a vendor certification program on behalf of an entity; and

at least one database, coupled to the learning management component, comprising a curriculum offered as part of the vendor certification program, and comprising information indicating that a vendor has certified vendor status after successfully completing the curriculum thereby entitling the vendor to preferential consideration during acquisition decisions by the entity.

23. (original) The system of claim 22, wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity.

24. (original) The system of claim 22, further comprising:

a delivery component, coupled to learning management component, for delivering the curriculum to the vendor.

25. (original) The system of claim 22, further comprising:

a financial transaction component, coupled to the learning management component, that handles payment by the vendors for participation in the vendor certification program.

26. (original) The system of claim 22, wherein the network interface communicates with a public network.

27. (original) The system of claim 26, wherein the network interface communicates with either of Internet or World Wide Web networks.

28. (original) The system of claim 22, wherein the network interface communicates with a private network.

29. (original) An apparatus for a vendor to obtain preferred status from an entity via a communication network, the apparatus comprising:

a network interface for communicating with the communication network;

at least one processor coupled to the network interface; and

at least one memory device, coupled to the at least one processor, having stored thereon executable instructions that, when executed by the at least one processor, cause the at least one processor to:

receive a curriculum included in a vendor certification program offered by the entity via the communication network;

receive, from the entity, a notification of certified vendor status in response to successful completion of the curriculum,

wherein the certified vendor status confers preferential consideration during acquisition decisions by the entity.

30. (original) The apparatus of claim 29, wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity.

31. (original) The method of claim 29, wherein the network interface communicates with a public communication network.

32. (original) The method of claim 31, wherein the network interface communicates with either of an Internet or World Wide Web communication network.

33. (original) The method of claim 29, wherein the network interface communicates with a private communication network.

34. (previously presented) A method for an entity to establish preferred business partners via a communication network, the method comprising:

- providing a vendor certification program comprising a curriculum via the communication network on a fee basis;

- receiving a notification that a vendor has successfully completed the vendor certification program; and

- granting certified vendor status upon the vendor indicated in the notification, wherein the certified vendor status confers preferential consideration to the vendor during acquisition decisions by the entity,

- wherein the curriculum is based on subject matter expertise possessed by the entity;

- undertaking an acquisition decision;

- accessing information regarding a plurality of vendors, the plurality of vendors comprising at least one vendor having certified vendor status; and

- providing preferential consideration to the at least one vendor having certified vendor status when resolving the acquisition decision.